

## 'Better Eight Than Never' - The Newsletter of MLB8

### Week 2 Review

The Champions of Season 1 are off to the best start of anyone as Paul Beaumont's Angels look set to mount a major challenge again this season. Great SS Adam Kennedy is off to a hot start with 9 homers and 23 RBI's. If he can stay injury-free, which has been a problem in the last 2 seasons, he could be set for a huge year.

Their nearest challengers at this early stage in the AL are the 12-6 Kansas City Royals of Alastair Brearley. The Royals are getting quality pitching and are playing 'moneyball' on offense as they are drawing walks and hitting homers for fun as they lead the majors in runs scored. Though it's early it's good to see a young catcher performing so well in the AL as Mike DiFelice is hitting .363 with 7 homers and 18 RBI's.

The only team off to a horrific start in the AL (in fact in the entire league) are the Seattle Mariners. They are 4-14 and GM Paul Coffey must be worried that a repeat of the debacle of Season 1 might be in store.

In the NL, the Marlins and Reds are off to the best starts. The Reds start is not surprising in some ways as they are always a major contender. However, it is slightly surprising in that GM Mayfield has publicly said that he doesn't think this team is quite good enough and is embarking on a rebuilding job.

Moves have already been made (with more likely to come) and it appears that MVP Ryan Freel is definitely leaving this week – moving in exchange for a 1<sup>st</sup> round pick from this year's draft, though the team concerned has not been made public yet. If Freel leaves, he may well be replaced as MVP by team-mate Jason LaRue who is off to another great start. Another Red performing at the top of his game is switch-hitting 2B Joe Morgan who leads the NL with 8 homers and 22 RBI's.

GM Guard-Ward will be very happy with the start from his Marlins, though pitching must remain a concern. The staff ERA is 5.13 which is the 2<sup>nd</sup> worst in the National League. If they are to stay top of what is sure to be a close division, this will need to improve. 2 things not to be concerned about are 3B Miguel Cabrera and C Ivan Rodriguez who are both off to great starts.

No-one is off to a horrible start in the NL though it looks like it may be another long year in Milwaukee. It's interesting – and not surprising – to see the Dodgers and Nationals off to solid 11-7 starts though the Nats pitching has been surprisingly average.

The big free agent acquisition this week was the Giants signing of last year's AL Gold Glove SS Kevin Millar. Millar brings not only his glove but a power bat to a Giants lineup that has been more based on speed so far. San Fran haven't had a great start but adding Millar to a lineup that features a couple of youngsters off to great starts (Benito Santiago and Tom Sanders) can only be a big help.

In other signings, the Jays picked up veteran 2B Marcus Giles from the Braves to replace Mike Bordick (more on that later). The Devil Rays are said to be delighted with their acquisition of pitcher Jeremi Gonzalez from the Marlins. The Brewers added a hit to their ailing offense, signing prospect Rickie Weeks. Finally, the Reds saw something in ex-Royals pitcher Aaron Guiel that others hadn't as they offered him a major signing bonus to come to Ohio.

### Fielding

The quality of fielding has been a major topic this year. It is obviously early but the standard has been much lower than in recent years. A number of teams have really suffered (Toronto, Seattle, Milwaukee) with fielding percentages in the .950's and .960's – figures not really seen before. The only team with a fielding percentage in the .990's are the A's who do have a tremendous fielding group.

The standard of fielding has led to a couple of interesting stories around the league. Veteran 2B Mike Bordick was released by the Jays this week, purely (it seems) due to a horrific time in the field in Week 1. Publicly, it was stated that he missed Week 2 due to a 'strained bicep' but unnamed sources from Toronto claim that GM Philip Howard spent most of the week trying to find a loophole in Bordick's contract so that he could be released.

It appears he found one with the release of Bordick and the signing of replacement Marcus Giles. A source from within the organisation who preferred not to be named said – "Whilst not wanting to jeopardise Bordick's future career, management just couldn't understand how Mike was playing so badly after being such a solid player in the past. They came to the conclusion that there was something either physically or mentally seriously wrong with him and that he was no longer of any use to the organisation."

Whether this is the case remains to be seen and it will be interesting to see if anyone takes a chance on Bordick in the future. Whilst some may only see Week 1 of this season, others may look at the solid performances in the previous 2 seasons (about a .250 avg, slugging of .460, fld% about .990, 62 stolen bases, 36 homers, 139 RBI's) and his contribution to a World Series win last year.

Another manager bemoaning something to do with fielding was Braves GM Mike Sim. The team average across the league for double plays turned so far this season is 14.5. So, imagine Sim's frustration when the Cubs turned 11 double plays in a 3-game sweep of the Braves in Atlanta? In addition, these were all close games – two 1-run defeats and a 2-run defeat – with 2 of the double plays coming in the bottom of the 9<sup>th</sup>.

The only consolation is that the Cubs do lead the league in double plays turned (helped by that series obviously). All Sim was quoted as saying was – "I hope I never see another series like that!" He'd better hope not in the ever-competitive NL East.

#### **Other early-season batting stars**

A number of relatively unknown players are off to great starts with the bat so far. The White Sox may be off to a poor start as a team but SS Willie Harris, RF Miguel Olivo and DH Brian Daubach certainly aren't letting the team down. Along with established players like Alomar, Graffanino and Miles this lineup looks capable of putting plenty of runs on the board throughout the season. They just need to get the pitching staff performing.

Surprisingly, the Twins have been led by their bats not their arms so far. SS Corey Koskie has been his usual self but a couple of other infielders have made a big impact. 3B Gerald Laird is batting .307 whilst 1B Chris Gomez is on a tear, hitting .376 with 9 stolen bases. Gomez has always looked to be a player of immense promise and may have his 'breakout' year this time around.

Tampa are still struggling a bit as a team but this has nothing to do with young 1B Barry Wesson and veteran DH Salomon Torres (slugging % .736). The A's solid start has more to do with great pitching but this has been helped by a hot start from emerging OF Adam Melhuse who is another who looks set to have his 'breakout' year.

In the National League, a few Pirates have paced the team to their position of leading the NL in team

batting average. The veteran core of the infield (Carlos Rivera, Bobby Hill and Abraham Nunez) are all performing superbly with averages over .340. If they can maintain this, the Pirates might be primed to make a run this year, particularly with the Reds looking to rebuild.

The Cubs are in there as well and have been led by surprisingly major contributions from SS Ramon Martinez and 1B Alex Gonzalez. Gonzalez in particular was not expected to be batting over .400.

The Giants have youngsters Santiago and Sanders off to fabulous starts whilst fellow NL Westers, Arizona, have veterans Junior Spivey and Matt Kata off to great starts as well as their great young switch-hitter Danny Bautista.

Will all of the guys mentioned above maintain this throughout the season? Unlikely. But some will and will be joined by some of the perennial names that are always at the upper end of the batting stats come season's end.

#### **Week 3 Preview**

In divisional matchups this week, the Nationals host the Braves in a series that tends to have a lot to do with the outcome of the NL East, whilst the Angels travel to Texas looking to put an early season dagger into the stuttering Rangers.

Other big AL matchups include the fast-starting Royals travelling to the World Champs, whilst the Angels follow their series with Texas with a visit to the Twin Cities and then a home series against the Red Sox.

Headline NL matchups are the Dodgers at the Nationals (with LA looking for revenge after last year's NLDS), Cincy at LA (in a repeat of the NLCS of Season 1) and the Marlins trip to Colorado – the 2 teams who lost out at the death in the battle for the NL Wild Card last season.

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<http://www.uk.groups.yahoo.com/group/gameplanbaseball/messages> A discussion group for Gameplan Baseball managers. The group includes discussions on the features of the game, news, results, and possible developments.

Until next week, Ian.